

Chapter One

Autumn 518

I was dreaming of a night long ago in Avalon, when the crickets sang and mild breezes stirred the inland grasses. Aggrivane lay in stretched supine, eyes less on the stars than on me. We were so innocent then, ignorant of the fate that would wrench us apart, only to drive us together again and tear us asunder – this time forever. But those were the cares of our time-worn elder selves; for now, all we knew about was one another. His lips met mine and the world spun, dissolving and reforming on waves of passion until the low moan of a horn shattered our bliss and brought us back to the present.

“They are calling for me,” Aggrivane said.

But somehow I knew this was not the carryx of the Druids calling him to Avalon’s shores so the Druids could leave us. As my dream deflated and I lay drowsily suspended between consciousness and sleep, the Sight flooded my mind with memories I had, until that moment, managed to suppress.

As Lancelot and I fled Camelot the day Arthur nearly burned me alive at the stake, all I could think about was escape. The courtyard around us was a blur of noise and confusion. I clung to Lancelot for my very life, feeling his muscles ripple

and tighten, then release, as he fought through the crowd of frightened spectators toward the gates and freedom beyond. I couldn't even feel the raw burns that traced my left side from my leap through the roaring fire. I was numb to all save the present moment and my desperate need to survive.

But now, my mind released everything, spurred on by that resonant horn, as though the trumpeter expelled the memories from my mind with the force of his breath. I was separated by a curtain of flames from the crowd of subjects who had gathered to witness by death as an adulterous traitor. Thus far, the gifts so carefully honed in Avalon had spared me from the deadly lick of flame, but my strength was failing; it was only a matter of time before I succumbed.

But then the bonds binding me to the stake slackened. I turned my head and over my shoulder beheld Mordred, covered in layers of wet cloth, hacking at the leather straps with his dagger. They snapped, setting me free.

“Promise me one thing,” he said. “Do not seek the throne while I live.”

Bewildered, I could only assent. “I promise.”

He looked up, squinting through the flames. “Lancelot comes, go!”

Shaking blood back into my numb wrists and hands, I followed his gaze, spotting Lancelot astride his stallion, racing toward me through the panicked crowd. Many of them parted willingly, not wishing to be run down by the galloping horse and rider, but some he had to swat away with the flat of his sword.

He called my name as he neared the pyre and I inhaled deeply, smoke penetrating my defenses for the first time and threatening to choke me. I had not the ability to focus on both keeping the flames at bay and on hitting my mark as his horse sped past, so I had to resign myself to my coming injuries. Calling on all my skills as a horsewoman and a warrior, I said a silent prayer to Epona to guard me, and then leapt through the fire.

Immediately, heat enveloped me, incinerating my thin gown, crisping my skin and frying my hair to ash and straw. With a whoosh, I was through the flames, grasping Lancelot's outstretched arm and propelling myself painfully onto the horse behind him. I squeezed my eyes shut and nestled behind Lancelot, my charred clothing and hair still smoking, and my skin crackling like roasted boar. I hugged him close, ignoring the sour dampness of his sweat as I heaved in great lungfuls of clean air and struggled to maintain my balance atop the twisting horse.

"Come on, come on, move!" Lancelot yelled through gritted teeth.

I opened my eyes to locate the source of his consternation. Around us, men and women rushed in every direction seeking escape from Arthur's guards who pursued us like dogs on the hunt. Wide-eyed and flushed with panic, they called and cried to one another as the crowd descended into chaos, mothers seeking the sticky palms of children, men shielding their women with their bulk.

Most were running in the same direction as us, heading for the western gate. As the mouth of the gate narrowed, the mob slowed, bunched together like ants seeking refuge in their hill, able only to pass through in threes and fours. Hands picked at me from all sides, some seeking to topple me from the horse, others only hoping to steady themselves as their feet threatened to slip out from under them.

Lancelot cursed. There was nowhere for us go, no place to move. A few of the Combrogii who supported my innocence were trying in vain to hold back the press of bodies and clear a path for our horse, but the tide was against them. I glanced back, grateful that Arthur's men appeared to be caught in the same mire.

Aggravane and his brothers led the way in carving out a small space for our horse, pushing, shoving and yelling to get people to move. We were in the shadow of the gate when ahead of us, the crowd turned and began advancing on us, their way out clearly blocked. I sat up straight in the saddle to and lifted my head to peer above the fray, only to see that a contingent of Arthur's men had rounded on us and were now ready to engage us at the exit.

Aggravane and his men broke off from their attempts at crowd control to face down those preventing our escape. As they fought, Lancelot urged his horse forward, sword at the ready in case we had to fight our way out. As we neared the wall, a rain of projectiles descended on us from the slingers above. I buried my face in Lancelot's back, attempting to shield my head as stones bruised my flesh. A

jagged piece of stone lodged into the horses' rump and it reared, crying out. We pitched our weight forward, fearing it may topple backwards, crushing us both in the fall. Around us, people jumped back, piling atop one another to avoid injury from the spooked animal. But not everyone had room to move. I could only stare in mute horror as the horse's deadly hooves began to descend. There was nowhere for Aggrivane to hide, so he crouched down, arms flung overhead as the horse's hooves met his skin, knocking him to the ground directly in our path and toppling those around him as well.

I wanted so badly to dismount and tend to my former beloved, but to do so was tantamount to turning myself back over to the very people who just tried to have me killed. We had no choice but to charge forward, the animal's gait spongy as we trod over the fallen people.

The horn sounded again, its blast closer now, startling me awake. I sat up, gasping for breath, wincing as my sudden movement pulled at the scars twisting around my left side. I shook my head to clear it of the memories, seeking to ground myself in the present. My heart pounded and my ears rang, panic surging through my veins, just as it had after I escaped Malegant's abuse all those years before.

You are safe in Lothian. No one here will hurt you, I reminded myself.

Several weeks has passed since our escape from Camelot. **When** I look back, many of the past days are a fuzzy haze of pain, fever and disembodied voices,

mostly Lancelot's and Anna's, as I slipped in and out of consciousness while Anna tended to my wounds, dressing them with a mixture of honey and X. Even now, they still wept and needed to be kept bandaged, so I looked like one returned from war and only just alive.

As my breathing gradually slowed, I began to make out the clomp and clatter of men in the courtyard below. I flung off the bedcovers and quickly slipped on my tunic over my chemise, twisting my hair – what was left of it – into a rough braid as I scurried through the halls to the receiving chamber. Lancelot joined me at one intersection, close on my heels.

“That horn is an emergency signal.” He said. “I hope we are not under attack.”

We stopped just before the doorway, so we could remain hidden in the shadows – we wanted as few people as possible to know our whereabouts, lest they betray us to Arthur – but close enough to hear what the sweat-drenched man was saying to Lot and Anna.

“My Lord, my Lady, I am afraid I bring you the direst news and beg your forgiveness for what I am about to relay.” He raised his eyes long enough to take in each one in turn.

“Speak man,” Lot bellowed, his impatience clear. “What is your message?”

“It grieves me to report that another of your sons has died in Camelot.”

He paused, and in the silence I begged the gods that it was Gawain and not Aggravane. But given my dreams only minutes before, that was a false hope. Years ago, when I was but a young girl in Avalon, the Lady of the Lake told me the Sight would always warn me when one to whom my soul was connected was in danger.

Lot and Anna turned to one another, regarding one another in horror, their bloodshot eyes evidence that they were still grieving their younger sons, Gareth and Gaheris. They had died in the fighting that followed my escape.

The guard continued, “Aggravane perished from injuries received when he was defending the Queen and her champion as they fled Camelot. I am truly sorry.”

Even though I had had the warning of my dream or visions or memories or whatever they were, I still could not believe my ears. Aggravane couldn't be dead. It just wasn't possible. Lancelot put a comforting arm around my shoulders, pulling me close. Though he was my beloved now, he knew that Aggravane had been my first love from the time we met in Avalon when he was studying the ways of the Druids and I preparing to become a priestess. We even planned to wed, but Arthur asked me to marry him before we could pledge ourselves publically. Even after I wed Arthur - for I was not foolish enough to turn down the High King's proposal - I harbored great love in my heart for Aggravane. It was only after months of warring between my love for him and my duty to Arthur that I found the

strength to turn my back on Aggravane. That pain, combined with the sting of my choice of Lancelot over him as my champion, turned Aggravane against me. Only years later, once Arthur had chosen Morgan over me and I had taken Lancelot as my lover, did I find out how deep Aggravane's hurt ran. He, Arthur's son Mordred, and my childhood friend, Elaine, had conspired to expose my affair with Lancelot to Arthur. But in the process, they also opened me up to the wrath of Bishop Marius, with whom I'd had bad blood from my youth, and the supposedly holy man twisted my crimes into witchcraft and treason, for which Arthur had me condemned at the stake.

Remembering that day, I began to shake. "He said he would be with me to the very end, Lancelot. This cannot be. This isn't the end." I looked up, seeking solace in his eyes, only to behold that his face had gone white.

"I killed him," he whispered.

Behind us, Anna howled, a deep, animalistic sound of horror and despair known the world over to mothers grieving their children. I knew it well; I had uttered the very same sound when I lost my twins in childbirth long ago.

Setting aside my own pain, I pulled away from Lancelot and ran to Anna, taking her into my arms. Together, we crouched on the cold stone floor and rocked to and fro. She hiccupped and screamed through her tears, deaf to all around her.

The messenger cleared his throat. “There is another message I must give you.”

“What? Have you not caused us enough pain?” Lot spat, the slight hitch in his voice the only thing betraying his grief through an otherwise stoic façade.

“My apologies, my Lord.” The messenger bent into a slight bow. “The High King is on his way here. You should be ready to receive him before sundown.” I raised my head from Anna’s shoulder and sent Lancelot a concerned glance.

I always knew Arthur would track me down. My escape from death at the stake could not remain the final word in our story. He would not let it. Was that why the king was here? It would be highly unusual for him to pay a personal visit to Lot to offer his condolences, even though Aggravane was one of his Combrogii. No. It had to be something more. Had he received word that Lancelot and I were sheltering here? If so, we could not remain another instant. We were both fugitives of the king’s justice, and Lancelot was doubly condemned as both a traitor in his affair with me and for interrupting my death sentence.

I signaled to one of Anna’s servants to take my place at her side. “Make her a tea from the blend she has been giving me. It will calm her and help her to rest,” I said to the girl. “Anna, I am so sorry to leave you like this, after all you have done for me – you saved my life – but I must go. Arthur cannot find us here.”

She nodded and met my eyes, having aged two decades in the last five minutes. “Yes, I understand,” she croaked. “Do what you must.”

With a last glance at Lot, who was still rooted in place, still and distant as a statue, I returned to Lancelot’s side.

“We must be away. Arthur cannot find us here. Otherwise all we have done, all this, the death of Lot’s sons, everything will have been in vain. We must get to port and sail to Brittany where Arthur has no justification.”

Lancelot merely nodded like one lost in thought. We hurried back to our rooms to gather our belongings we had before departing. As I came to Lothian straight from the stake and Lancelot from battle, we had very little, so soon we were headed to the stables.

Lancelot went through the motions of saddling his horse, though his eyes were still clouded and distant. After cinching the buckle around the horse’s middle, he looked up at me and said with solemnity. “This is all my fault.”

Taken unawares, as I was deep in my own thoughts, which were still chasing one another around the idea that my first – and perhaps greatest – love was dead, I thought I misheard him. “What?”

He shook his head. “This. All of this. It is my fault. I killed Aggravane, my bother in arms, by interfering. If I had only listened to Mordred–” His eyes brimmed with tears.

“What does Mordred have to do with this?”

“He came to see me after we were imprisoned. I thought he was there to gloat, but to my surprise he released me. He told me he never meant for anyone’s lives to be in dangers and that he was going to make sure you lived. But he also warned me to stay away from Camelot.” He shook his head again and pinched the area between his eyes. “I should have listened.”

I stopped bridling my horse and reached up to take Lancelot’s shoulders. “If you had not come to rescue me, I would be dead. No matter what else happened, I will never, ever hold you responsible for anything other than saving my life.” I gave him a little shake, which really didn’t move him at all, but it did pull his attention back out of self-loathing reverie. “Do you hear me?”

Lancelot nodded and pulled me close, kissing me on top of the head. “I only wish I could be so forgiving of myself.”

I forced a smile. “You will be, in time. Aggravane may be dead, but you did not run him through. You did not push him down in front of your horse nor cause its hooves to strike him. You did not kill him. What happened was a terrible accident, but you should not be punished any more **than** what you would inflict upon your horse.” I hugged him to me. “And I know the love you bear that animal. You would be merciful indeed.”

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We raced down the hillside from Traprain Law toward the road to Dunbar which would take us to our waiting ship and across the sea to Brittany. Around a bend we came to a halt as Arthur's party came into view on the road below us. He had with him only a few guards, certainly not enough to lay siege to Lot's castle. That was a good sign, one that indicated he hadn't come for blood.

Arthur sat slumped in his saddle, bowed toward his horse's head, rather than tall, as I was used to seeing him. A wave of guilt washed over me at the sight. I had been so busy demonizing him and worrying about myself that it never occurred to me that he might also be suffering. But then I remembered this was the same man who had given the order to have me killed, and not in a quick, merciful manor. No. He chose a prolonged torture.

My whole body flushed at the thought. I wanted to rail at him, to yell and scream, to ask him how the very same man who once pledged his love to me, the one who ruled beside me for X years, could have done this to me.

"You want to confront him." Lancelot said, as though reading my thoughts. "I can see it in your eyes."

I blinked rapidly, trying to forstall the tears of rage building behind my eyes. “I do. I am tired of running, tired of being his victim. But I don’t want to abandon you.”

Lancelot regarded me for a long moment, during which the soft jangle of the horses’ tack in the valley below and the rhythmic clop of the hooves was the only sound. “Very well then. I will stay with you. We will face him together.”

I desperately wanted to accept Lancelot’s offer, but I could see the fear in his eyes. Arthur had already tried to have me killed once, so I had little more to fear from him. But Lancelot stood to lose everything, including his life. There was no telling what the once benevolent Arthur would do now. If he could murder his wife, what more would he do to a man who had betrayed him twice?

I shook my head. “No. I cannot let you sacrifice yourself for me. Go to Brittany. Prepare your home and ready our new lives there. I will join you as soon as I can.”

“Guinevere, I am your champion. I cannot leave you undefended against this monster.”

“Have I not proven to you time and time again that I can defend myself?”

“With a sword, perhaps, but who will safeguard your heart?”

I leaned over and pressed my lips against his. “My heart is yours, now and forever, my love. This I promise you.”

#

Lot met me at the gates when I returned to Traprain Law.

“Why have you returned? What is wrong?”

“Nothing. I saw Lancelot safely onto the ship, but I knew I had to stay. To run would only give Arthur more reason to keep pursuing us. When I leave these shores for Brittany, I want it to be for good. I cannot keep running from him.”

Lot sighed inwardly. “So you intend to made a stand.”

I gave him a mischievous smile. “Would you expect anything less? Now, I will to watch him approach from the walls, as a queen should. Will you join me?”

We ascended the stairs and soon looked out on the countryside below. Sure enough, a cloud of dust marred the horizon, marking Arthur’s progress.

“I told my men to stand down unless I command otherwise. I want you to know that I am of no mind to fight this man.”

“What, no open rebellion this time, old friend?” I twisted my lips into a sarcastic smile.

“Not unless he provokes me. I’m getting to old to instigate wars, but I’ll see every one through to the end.” Lot’s eyes twinkled in jest as he searched my face,

but his forehead was strained with worry. “Are you ready to face him? Do you wish me to speak for you, at least at first?”

I shook my head. “Thank you, but no.” I took a deep breath. “This is something only I can do.” I took a step forward, embracing him. “I cannot thank you enough for sheltering me all this time. This is the only place I could have healed, mentally and physically, from the scars of that day. You have done me a great service.”

Lot stepped back so that he could look me in the eye. “You should have been my daughter by marriage and you will always be my queen, no matter what *he* says. You have my loyalty through my dying breath. Know that.” Lot’s chin quivered at the unvoiced reference to Aggravane.

I kissed him gently on the cheek. “Thank you. I cannot even begin to fathom the sorrow you must be feeling right now. I am so sorry I was the reason he was at Camelot’s gates that day.”

“Nonsense. My son is the only one to blame for what happened. If he and Mordred and that little X Elaine hadn’t betrayed you, you never would have needed rescuing. If there is blame, let it be on his head.”

One of Lot’s servants approached and handed him a roll of parchment, which he immediately held out to me. “Take this. It is the safe passage to Din Ediyen

Lot rubbed his eyes. “The once great house of Lothian.” His is now reduced to father and one son bent on revenge. Arthur should thank his stars that Gawain is not here. *He* would not hesitate to revenge his brothers here and now, no matter the size of the army Arthur has brought with him.”

Beneath my crimson tunic, my knees shook. I took a deep, ragged breath, trying to calm the lightheadedness that threatened to engulf me. I grasped the rough stone until my knuckles were white, but even that didn't stop my fingers from trembling, palms from sweating. No matter how I turned it around in my head, I was still one of Arthur's subjects, his disgraced queen, a fugitive of his justice. I had no idea if he would arrest me or simply order Lot to stand aside while he severed my head right here. No, Arthur was a compassionate man. I had to remember that. I was his wife. His justice would be private, though he might still drag me in chains through the streets of Camelot first.

Arthur may have stripped me of my title, but I was still a priestess of Avalon. I would face him with dignity. To Bedivere, I said, “Tell Lot I will not object to his protection, but I will not be his excuse for starting a war, either.”

As Bedivere hurried off to deliver my message, I cast one last glance at the advancing figures, which were growing larger by the heartbeat. *Great Mother, protect me, I prayed. My only crime was loving another. Help him see that.* After another moment of silence, in which I reconciled myself to my fate, I squared my shoulders and set off.

#

The wind whipped my robes in to clouds around me as we watched Arthur’s party approach the stronghold. I stood in the center of the courtyard, flanked by Lot and Bedivere, who had abandoned Arthur to support me. Behind us, Lot’s men were positioned in a crescent, fanning out to protect us from any attack.

Arthur entered the gates first, riding the twin of my own horse, a great gray stallion, whose muscular girth was not even enough to dwarf the stature of his rider. Even in his advancing age, Arthur’s height and brawn made him fearsome to behold. Where other men responded to the passage of years by curling in on

themselves like fading flowers, Arthur held his head high, shoulders squared, every inch the High King. Even his skin, which was crossed with deep wrinkles and battle scars, appeared chiseled, rather than wizened. Had he not betrayed me so, I would be proud to have married such a handsome man.

But in this moment, I was thinking of another man, one I loved, one who was far away for his own safety. My right hand twitched. I longed to have Lancelot by my side, to finish what we started together. But this was for the best. If one of us had to face Arthur's wrath, better it be me.

Arthur halted his horse, leaving a plane of empty space between us. Kay reigned in next to him and Bedivere stiffened beside me. It couldn't be easy for him to see his best friend again after choosing to follow me rather than serve Arthur in the aftermath of my escape.

Once the dozen or so men filed in behind him, Arthur spoke, retaining his position of privilege by remaining mounted. "King Lot, I come in peace to speak with your guest. As I bear no arms against you for sheltering her, I trust you will bear none against me."

Lot laughed, incredulous that Arthur would even mention such a thing. "We will not rise against you. My only motive for 'sheltering her,' as you say, was to give her a place to recover. You did try to burn her at the stake, remember?"

Arthur's eyes flicked to mine and I turned my head, giving him a clear view of the pink rivulets that marred the side of my face and neck, snaking down my entire left side to my hips, permanent reminders of my leap through the fire. What he could not see, however, were the scars on my heart from knowing, thanks to the sight, that he had not intended to sentence me to death. That he was set up. He did not know that I was aware of the truth.

I stepped forward then, cutting the space between us in half. "Leave Lot out of this, Arthur. He was merely showing me the hospitality you demand from your Combrogii. I am the real reason you are here. We both know that." I put my hands on my hips. "If you truly wish to speak with me, come down from there and address me as your equal, which, queen or no, I certainly am."

Arthur nodded, almost imperceptibly, handing his reigns to Kay. He jumped down off his mount and approached me warily, as if some part of him suspected a trap lie hidden in my forthright manner. He halted in front of me, studying me in silence. With his right forefinger, he traced the scars on my face. His eyes welled, facial muscles seeking to control emotion he dare not allow to escape in front of his men.

I was not ready to give in to his veiled remorse yet. Let him suffer. It would only be a small amount of repayment for what I had endured. I made a show of scanning his assembled men. "Where is your wife? Had she not the stones to face

me in person?" I asked, referring to Morgan, Arthur's second wife with whom I had a life-long rivalry and who had been a catalyst to my near lethal encounter with the flames.

Arthur swallowed hard. "She is no longer my wife."

"Ah, did you divorce us both on the same day or did it take you longer to shake off her spell?"

"Guinevere, please. I came here seeking peace."

A cold laugh escaped my lips. "Rich words coming from you."

Arthur put out a hand to me. "Please, may we speak in private?"

I looked around and raised my voice. "Why? You divorced and dethroned me in public, why should this time be any different? Anything you have to say to me, you can say to King Lot and his men."

Arthur stepped closer to me. "If you wish me to publicly repent, I shall. But we must have the rest of this conversation in private." He vaulted back onto his horse, rearing it to get everyone's attention. "Hear me, men of Camelot and Lothian. I was wrong to condemn my queen and even more in error when I considered death as a fitting punishment to assuage my thirst for vengeance. I was misguided, but do not fall upon that as an excuse. I ask you here and now to witness my apology to the woman whom I wronged."

I let the silence settle like so much dust underfoot, debating how to respond. For a king, much less the High King, to humble himself so publicly was rare indeed. On the other hand, mere words meant little. Were I not a priestess of Avalon, I would have succumbed to the deadly flames.

I studied Arthur's eyes, trying to measure his sincerity. Around us, dirt crunched as soldiers shifted their weight and horses snorted as their riders wriggled in their saddles, growing uncomfortable with the very open tension between us.

Finally, I raised my arm to Arthur. "There will never be enough words to set things right. But let us finish this meeting in a more hospitable setting." I indicated the wind, which was burning our skin and eyes. "I am certain your men would appreciate food and rest."

Lot stepped behind me then, extending a hand to Arthur in friendship. "I bid you all welcome to Traprian Law."

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Once the horses were stabled and men fed, Arthur and I retreated to Lot's personal chambers, with only Lot and Kay as witnesses to the conversation to come.

“Where to begin?” Arthur asked himself, scratching the nape of his neck and pacing nervously. He took a deep breath. “I did not intend to kill you; that you need to know. A night of prayer showed me just how wrong Bishop Marius was in demanding your death. Upon reflection, I realized he was not in the least concerned with your affair. He claimed to be concerned with your treasonous betrayal of me, but he was really acting out of his own selfish concerns – all because you do not share my faith. You were unfaithful to me, yes, but as you said, I was equally disloyal to you. The whole trial became much more than anyone, Aggravane and Mordred included, ever intended. They have told me how sorry they are.”

“And they have shown me, in aiding in my rescue. But what of you? I know you were unable to stop the burning. I saw it in a vision as the fire raged around me. What will you do now to set things right?”

Arthur’s face lit up with hope. “That is why I am here, to express my sorrow. If you had a vision, then you know I was ill, incapacitated.” His words came faster now, as he sought to make me understand. “I have been over and over that night in my head, trying to determine why I was so ill. It was no ordinary illness, so I must suspect poison. The only thing I consumed that no one else did was Holy Communion, so the wine likely was drugged. I am holding Bishop Marius under suspicion he was involved.”

“That fits what I saw. But Arthur, you need to know someone else was involved. You will not be pleased when I tell you who, but know that regardless of my personal feelings, I speak the truth.”

Arthur studied my eyes and as he did so, I saw deep within his that he already knew the truth. “It was Morgan, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. I take no pleasure in telling you that.”

Arthur let out a slow, deep breath. “She certainly had access to all manner of poisons. My own wife.” He said the words as though in a dream. At his side, his hands began to shake. “Are you certain? This is not simply a ploy to see her disgraced, is it?”

“Arthur.” I sighed. “You said her name first, remember? If you are going to accuse me of lying after everything that has happened, I am finished speaking with you.” I turned to leave, stomach in knots that he could be defending Morgan even now.

He grabbed my shoulder, stopping my retreat. “I am so sorry. That is not at all what I intended. What you say corroborates what others recall of that night. Someone saw Morgan bar my door, so it stands to reason she was also the source of the poison.”

I looked up at him, seeing for the first time what a strain this burden placed on him. “What will you do to her? And what about the Bishop?”

Arthur shook his head. "I do not know. For now, they are both detained. That is the other reason I came here, to ask you to return to Camelot with me."

I searched his face for some hint of jest. Finding none, I burst out laughing, incredulous at his request. "You wish me to accompany you back to the place you tried to kill me? Why would I ever do that? I am no longer queen, remember?"

"I am asking you to return to our home. You are the only witness to what happened besides Morgan and Marius. Of course, they deny the whole thing. But I wish to see justice served. I need you to testify to what your visions showed you."

"*You need me.* That is amusing. Why should I testify for you? You said someone saw Morgan. That is enough for you to punish her however you choose. Whether or not the Bishop knew about the poison is irrelevant, as he rendered judgment on your behalf without your consent – a treasonous offense. You have no need of me." I turned my face away. "Please, Arthur, just let me be."

Arthur stopped pacing, leaning in toward me. "One of the Bishop's deacons has knowledge of repeated meetings between Morgan and the Bishop. He is willing to tell all, to condemn them both, provided you share what you know as well. Taken together, there can be no question of their complicity."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You are the High King. You can do whatever you like and you seem to have already rendered judgment. I ask again, why should I go with you?"

I had no desire to accompany him anywhere. What's more, I still feared for my life, not so much from Morgan and Marius – they had been neutralized – but from the throngs of people who at jeered me on my way to the stake. They certainly would not be happy to see me again, and attempts had been made on our lives before, in much better times.

Arthur ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. “You know the law. You also know how I govern my kingdom. Without your statement and that of the deacon, it will look as though I am unjustly persecuting Morgan and Bishop Marius. They have very powerful allies, so you know what that could mean. Open rebellion.” Arthur's bloodshot eyes were pleading. “I am trying to save Camelot.”

“So all of this –” I swept my arm around, indicating the troops now settled into the barracks – “is to save your own hide. If I don't testify, you fear you will be viewed as unjust and someone may try to overthrow you.” I studied him for a moment, thinking of all the pain he put me through since my return from being kidnapped by Malegant. “Personally, I think that is exactly what you deserve. What you did to me, even putting Morgan and Marius' involvement aside, is unforgiveable. Yet you dare ask me for help.” I shook my head and rose, heading toward the door, indicating to Lot I was ready to bring this farce to an end.

“Doesn't some small part of you wish revenge on Morgan and Marius, the two people who have wronged you most in this world?”

I stopped, but did not turn. Part of me wanted to agree, while the more rational side bristled that Arthur would stoop so low as to even ask. “All other arguments have failed, so now you appeal to my basest inclinations? If that is not respect, I know not what is.”

“Please don’t be this way. I have already apologized and said I need you. What more do you want from me?”

I may not have been as conniving as Morgan, but I knew an opportunity when I heard it. This was my chance to set my life straight and I was going to take it. I spun around to face him, only to find Arthur on his knees before me. “Pardon Lancelot in open court and ensure his safe passage back to Britain. If you personally guarantee no harm will come to either of us, I will assent to your request.”

A range of emotions flickered across Arthur’s face – incredulity, pain, serious deliberation and finally, acceptance. “It will be done.”

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It was only on the long ride back to Camelot that the tears finally came. Of all the loss I had faced in my life – my mother, father, Octavia, countless friends

and warriors lost to war – this pain was the most bitter. Aggravane was my first love and with his death I grieved the end of the hopes I still held from our youth; he was my greatest mistake, but one I would make again if given the chance, a man I betrayed in my efforts to safeguard both our hearts and our reputations; and he had betrayed me, too, but he was also there for me in the darkest moments before what by all rights should have been my death. To say goodbye to him was to bid farewell to so much of who I had been, to dreams buried deep, to love that could never be.

I steeled myself as I fixed my eyes on the road ahead. Aggravane's was another death best laid at Arthur's feet. He now had more than my blood upon his hands, and if he wanted me to act as judge, I would. But he should not expect the Mother's mercy. No, so much pain could only summon the wrath of the Crone.